MEMBER FOCUS GROUPS: A SUMMARY

J. Clifford Fox J.D., Ph.D.

Center for Environmental Studies

Virginia Commonwealth University

INTRODUCTION AND METHOD

- Goals of Focus Groups
  - To better understand past activities of members.
  - To explore member opinions on future changes to the program.
  - To examine communication and ways to improve it.
- Method
  - One group per metropolitan area.
  - Structured conversation method with the same facilitator for each group.

RECRUITMENT AND FACILITATION

- Recruitment
  - Conducted by program staff from membership database.
  - Sought diversity of size and sector of organization.
  - A light meal and $50 were provided as incentives.
- Facilitation
  - Facilitated by J. Clifford Fox.
  - Used a broad facilitation guide based upon questions provided by Clean Air Partners.

FOCUS GROUP PROCESS

- Groups were held from 5 – 7 PM.
  - Refreshments and greetings at 5:00.
  - Introduction and general information about change in standard presented by Harriet West.
- Focus Group discussions began with ground rules at approximately 5:30.
- Both groups were held in confidential setting (group members and facilitator only).
- Both groups ended at or just before 7:00 PM.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FOCUS GROUPS

- Washington, DC
  - Held at MWCOG on February 16, 2006
  - Well attended (12/13 attended) and lively
  - 2/3 male (8-4)
  - 2/3 large organizations (8-4)
  - 1/2 Governmental Organizations

  governmental=6
  private=3
  non-profit=3

- Baltimore, MD
  - Held at BMC on February 23, 2006
  - Well attended (9/12 attended) and lively
  - 2/3 male (6-3)
  - Balanced by organization size (5 large and 4 small)
  - Balanced as to sector

  governmental=3
  private=4
  non-profit=2

CAUTIONS AND DISCLAIMERS

○ Focus group research is qualitative in nature.
- Not a random sample nor large N.
- Not proportionally generalizable to population.

○ Focus group research is "suggestive" not "descriptive."
- Provides integrative information arising from discussion (emergent ideas).
- Provides emotive information.

PAST PARTICIPATION:
Responses to AQAD Notification

- Consensus ideas:
  - Employees or affiliate organizations were notified by e-mail and/or related method (e.g., web site, daily bulletin).
  - E-mail content varied widely from simple notice to recommended actions.
  - Flags were of mixed value depending upon individual circumstance.
  - Limited number of larger organizations had detailed plans that were implemented in response to notification.
  - Authority to respond to the notification was broadly delegated to the coordinator.

PAST PARTICIPATION: Responses to AQAD Notification

- Emergent ideas:
  - Late in the day notification of forecast episode often made response difficult or impossible.
  - Attaching an upper management statement of support for action to the notification e-mail to employees provides added weight.

PAST PARTICIPATION:
Evaluation and Valuing of Program

- Consensus ideas:
  - Measures of the effectiveness of the program were generally anecdotal, if at all.
    - Responses to e-mail notification requesting additional information etc.
    - Informal phone calls discussing compliance.
  - Few elements of response plans were mandatory and so measures of compliance levels would be useful.
  - Everyone saw value in the program, but the nature of that value was dependent upon the specifics of the organization.
- Emergent ideas
  - Survey of employee compliance was supported.
  - Suggested that management support could be gained for a survey.

PAST PARTICIPATION:
Impact of Fewer Episodes

- Consensus ideas:
  - Fewer episodes over the last three years were widely seen as reducing buy-in among employees and others.
  - There was agreement that awareness had declined.
  - Although there was agreement that buy-in and awareness would benefit from more episodes, no consensus number arose.

FUTURE PARTICIPATION:
Responses to the Changed Standard

- ○ Consensus ideas:
  - Concern over too many episodes arose very early and with some strength, especially in the Washington group.
  - No consensus developed on reasonable number of episodes.
    - ○ Cleavage developed according to the intensity of the organization's response.
    - ○ More intensely involved organizations implied that present level of response could not be maintained.

FUTURE PARTICIPATION:
Responses to the Changed Standard

- Emergent ideas:
  - Fears emerged that major changes in message would be confusing and counter-productive.
  - While Code Red tag was seen as familiar, concerns arose over distinguishing it from the terror alert.
  - Idea emerged in both groups that this might present an opportunity to re-focus the message and re-gain buy-in especially at higher levels of the organizations.

FUTURE PARTICIPATION:
Rank Ordering the Options

- Consensus ideas:
  - All participants but one preferred dropping AQAD concept and focusing the Code Red and Code Orange messages.
  - Participants liked the familiarity of the labels and messaging.
  - Participants saw this option as providing the organizations a way to rationally tailor their responses so as to control the impact of more episodes, while maintaining their intensity of Code Red response.

COMMUNICATION:
Credibility of Sources for Air Quality Health Information

- Consensus ideas:
  - Consensus arose in both groups that EPA was the most credible of sources listed.
  - Both groups pointed to medical associations (AMA or American Academy of Pediatrics) as more credible than specific practitioners.
- Emergent ideas:
  - Maryland Department of the Environment emerged from Baltimore group discussion as the most credible in their area.
  - A coalition of voices representing health, community and business interests was mentioned as especially credible.

COMMUNICATION:
Communicating Program Changes

○ Consensus ideas:
  ● Multi-faceted approach was favored.
    ○ E-mails were very favorably mentioned.
    ○ Face to face was also strongly supported including on-site presentations and coordinator conferences.
  ● Developing upper-level buy-in was seen as important, as well.
    ○ Washington group particularly discussed the importance of broader media campaign to build this support.
    ○ Baltimore group saw the need for an all-level blitz of information.

COMMUNICATION: Communicating Program Changes

- Emergent ideas:
  - The importance of consulting with program coordinators on strategy for selling program changes on an organization by organization basis emerged from discussion.
  - Concern over how to integrate smaller participating organizations into the program emerged.
  - A concern emerged in the Baltimore group concerning the perception that their area received less face to face time from program staff.